

**Message for February 5, 2017**

Glennon Heights Mennonite Church

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Scripture passages: Isaiah 58:1-12 and Matthew 5:13-16

**Then your light will shine**

We are living in a time of upheaval. Things seem to be happening fast. We don't know what's coming next. For some of us, perhaps, the changes feel good and right. For others of us, they cause distress. We feel like we're losing our moorings. Like the light has gone out and we're floundering in the dark. All of us are aware of the divisions among us, of the harsh and often hateful words, of our tendency to vilify or disrespect those who think differently than we do, those whose point of view we just don't understand. We're all caught up in this mess. We all long for healing and hope. We long for clarity and light. Help us, God! Please, help us!

The passage that we read this morning from Isaiah 58 is one of my favorite Bible passages. When it came up in the lectionary rotation, I was happy to choose it as one of our scriptures for this Sunday. It is a passage that makes me feel good about myself: I'm not one of those hypocritical religious folks, after all. I don't oppress others while presenting myself as righteous and godly. Instead, I focus on feeding the hungry and caring for the homeless. Unlike the others who proclaim to be Christian, I am actually doing what's right and God is pleased with me. Surely my light is shining for all to see.

Well. As usually happens when I spend time with a Bible passage, praying with it and listening for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, things got challenging. I realized that I was missing the point. I began to understand that what God is saying through Isaiah isn't about me or anyone else making a choice to do the right things. No, it's deeper than that.

This is about motivation. It's about my reasons for responding as I do. Is my "religion"

self-motivated or God-motivated? That is the question.

In this passage, the people of Israel are wanting a relationship with God. “Day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways,” it says in verse 2. They do what they think God wants, which in this case is fasting, which means humbling oneself, “to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes.” (Verse 5) Now, there’s nothing wrong with fasting or with acts of self-denial. In fact, this can be a productive spiritual discipline. But it is not an end in itself. Fasting is an empty practice when it is all form and no substance. When, though ostensibly self-denial, it is actually focused more on self than on God and what God desires.

In this time of upheaval, some of us are crying out to God, “Help us! Pay attention to our pain! We are righteously concerned about what’s happening in our world! We are putting ourselves on the line. We are speaking up about all the bad things that are happening. But where are you? Why don’t you hear us?” We seek God’s help. We feel we deserve God’s help; we’re on the right side, after all. But, like the ancient people of Israel, we are unaware of our own self-centeredness. We are oblivious to our own rebellion against the ways of God.

“Look,” says the prophet, “you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.” We may feel righteous in our indignation, but when we strike out in anger, when we belittle those on the other side, when we use ugly words, when we refuse to listen or cooperate, when we build and fortify the barriers between us, we are focusing on ourselves, not God. We are focusing on what *we* think is right and good, instead of opening ourselves up to the leading of the Holy Spirit. We profess a desire to follow but we aren’t allowing God’s spirit to lead us into places where we might not want to go.

Places where we feel uncomfortable, even powerless. Places where God is directing the action, not us. We resist this. And our resistance, our unrecognized rebellion, our clinging to our “right” way of seeing things, only increases our dissatisfaction, our feelings of hopelessness and despair. Where are you, God? It’s so very dark here. We are longing for light.

Change your focus, God says to us. Get yourselves and your egos out of the way so that you can look through my eyes, so that you can see my real concern for the well-being of *all* people, including the ones you have trouble with. Let go of your need to respond in kind to things that feel heartless and hurtful. It’s not up to you to even the score. That’s not who I want you to be. This is not, and never is or will be, a vanquish-your-enemies-at-all-costs kind of thing. Don’t get into that. It goes nowhere. Instead, step back. Pray for wisdom and strength. Ask me to open your heart to those who are suffering, no matter where they come from or whose side they are on. Ask me to open your eyes to see the humanity in all people, no matter where they stand. Then follow. Follow my leading. In putting your own agenda aside in order to be able to care deeply, honestly, authentically for others, you will bring healing and you will be healed.

John Franz sent me a very interesting article this week. It was written by Andrés Miguel Rondón, a Venezuelan economist now living in Spain. The article was published in the January 27 issue of *The Washington Post*. Mr. Rondón writes about what happened in Venezuela when a populist movement came to power and things detrimental to the national well-being started happening. Folks resisted mightily but this only seemed to add fuel to the fire. That’s because populism needs an enemy to thrive, he says. Focusing on a perceived enemy is what keeps it alive and well.

“In Venezuela, we fell into this trap in a bad way,” Mr. Rondón writes. “We wrote again and again about principles, about separation of powers, civil liberties, the role of the military in politics, corruption and economic policy. But it took opposition leaders 10 years to figure out that they needed to actually go to the slums and the countryside. Not for a speech or a rally, but for a game of dominoes or to dance salsa — to show they were Venezuelans, too, that they weren’t just dour scolds and could hit a baseball, could tell a joke that landed. That they could break the tribal divide, come down off the billboards and show that they were real. This is not populism by other means. It is the only way of establishing your standing. It’s deciding not to live in an echo chamber. To press pause on the siren song of polarization.”

In this I hear echoes of what God is saying to us in the beautiful words of Isaiah. Get out there. Be present in the real world around you. Get to know what’s happening. Don’t shy away from places of suffering and struggle. Find ways to respond and relate that keep God’s deep interest in and love for humanity front and center. Press pause on the siren song of polarization.

This is also what Jesus is saying in Matthew 5 when he calls his followers – us – to be the salt of the earth. This teaching follows immediately after the Beatitudes which we talked about last week. Remember what is of value in the kingdom of God: the poor in spirit, those who lament, the meek and the weak, those who long for right relationships, the merciful, peacemakers. Take these values to heart. Shape your response accordingly. Be real – in all situations and with all people. Don’t shy away from the hard things. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you and then enter into them with love and caring for all concerned. If you do so, your very presence will add flavor and bring

out unexpected possibilities.

Yes, we live in a time of upheaval. Things seem dark and we long for light. We cry out for help. The good news is that if we get ourselves out of the way and listen, help is at hand. If you trust me, God says, and can reach out with genuine concern to those around you, your healing will come.

“Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.”

What beautiful words. What a wonderful assurance. “Your light shall break forth like the dawn.” Shine, Jesus tells us. Don’t be afraid to shine. “You are the light of the world.” You are vessels filled with living water. You have been healed and you can offer healing.

Sisters and brothers, don’t get caught up in the vitriol that surrounds us. Don’t measure your worth or commitment by how hard you fight back or how mean or stubborn you can be as you cling to the truth. Don’t do this even when it seems justifiable. Even

when you are full of righteous indignation on behalf of the poor or the marginalized. And when nothing seems to change and all feels lost, don't let helplessness overtake you and discourage you. Instead turn your focus to God and God's kingdom – again, and again. Remember how much God loves this world and *all* that is in it. Including yourself. Including your enemies. Ask God to help you in loving all the world as well. Allow God's spirit to guide you, perhaps to take you to unfamiliar places, to nudge you in surprising ways. Know that your only responsibility is to be faithful. To be a conduit for the working of God in this world. Then not only will God's light shine through you to the world, but you yourself will be healed.

“The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.”

This is the word of the Lord and it can be trusted. Amen.